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“POOR WHITE FOLKS”

BY HOOPER ALEXANDER, ESQ.,
Atlanta, Ga.

I have been asked to make some statements here in reference to the existence of a parasitic disease in the South, the remedy for which is to transfer the entire population into the cotton mills, as proposed by the discoverer of the disease, but it will be practically impossible for me to go into that subject in the very brief time to which I am limited. I can only say to you in the most general way, that, so far as we are concerned in the South, we have started out to put an end to this new offense of child labor.

I think we do not understand one another altogether. I know, I have always known, that you people here have some misconceptions about us in the South, and since I have been here, I think, I have seen those misconceptions growing; and I am inclined to think, maybe, we have some misconceptions about you.

We are exactly the same people that you are. We came from the same stock, only we have stuck to it a little better.

One of the speakers last night, Mrs. Harriman, had a good deal to say about the “poor whites”, as they call them in the South. Back in the times when slavery existed, the slave entertained toward the family of his master the same sort of personal affection that existed in old feudal times, and was disposed to look with a good deal of contempt upon those people who did not own slaves—and the vast majority of the people of the South did not own slaves, and were always from the first opposed to slavery.

The negroes came in contact with the overseer. The overseer, or superintendent, or manager, was generally an employed man whose people did not own slaves. From him the appeal of the slave lay to the master, and, consequently, a natural affection existed between the slave and the master, and there came to be in many instances a spirit of antagonism toward the class who did not own slaves, and the negro spoke of them, spoke of these people, in a contemptuous way as the “poor white folks”, or the “poor white trash”. I remember it distinctly from my childhood days, because

my memory goes back to that. But, as a matter of fact, it is a great mistake to suppose that there ever was such a class distinction in the South. You have here and throughout the North the Sons and Daughters of the Revolution, and there is a sort of distinction about it. Let me tell you that in the South there is not one man in ten who doesn't point with pride to the fact that his family comes from Revolutionary lines. It is the common heritage of all the people, and these people who have been spoken of here as a degraded and immoral race are the most moral race I have ever known. And I know them; I have lived among them all my life; and I know their habits and their ways of thought; and these are the people who have been held up to you as an utterly hopeless, degenerate, illiterate race, from whom nothing is to be expected.

You have here in Massachusetts 2,800,000 people. We have in Georgia 2,200,000, or did by the last census. Of your 2,800,000, 800,000 and more are not natives here, they having come in from foreign countries. In addition to that, there are 400,000 of your people who have come in from other States, and you have sent out from this State a little over 200,000. When you go to Georgia and find there 2,200,000 people, you find we have sent out to other States in this Union nearly 500,000, and received back 193,000, and we have in that State only 12,000 men who are not native Americans.

Now, that means that the population of that State is the same old stock; that it has not been replenished; that it is a fruitful race, and it is not possible, it cannot be, my friends, that a race of that sort of people is a degenerate race.

Senator Hoar, in one of his writings, took occasion to say that his entire political life had been spent in controversy with the representatives of the Southern people. He had no occasion, from a political standpoint, to regard them with sympathy, but it was his testimony that for a people who had adhered conscientiously through the years and through the generations to the fixed convictions of their souls, there was no people that equaled them, and it was his testimony, and it is the testimony of the records now, that every Southern Senator and every Representative that has served in the Congress of this Union for years and years has come out of it a poorer man than when he went into it. That sort of representatives does not spring from a degenerate race of people.

We found, a few years ago, the existence of slavery among

little children in the factories, and the State of Georgia immediately took steps to relieve it, and I want to give you my testimony, as one who has struggled in that fight, that the most difficult thing we have had to combat has emanated from New England.

The evil of child labor in the South is a new invention, and New England influences first set it in operation in the South. As soon as its presence was discovered, home influences went to work for its correction, and the Georgia Child Labor Committee, of which I am a charter member, General John B. Gordon being its first chairman, was organized and at work before the National Committee was thought of. Progress has been made, and more will be made.